DYING WE LIVE

By HUGH LAVERY

'SANS TEETH, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything'. Jaques ends his meditation on the human pageant with a line that speaks to the pessimist in us all. For there is ease in melancholy, beauty in decay and composure in pondering the emblems of mortality. Fountains Abbey has its pilgrims and the stones of Tintern moved Wordsworth to hear 'the still sad music of humanity'. The past remains in broken choirs, in ruins mellow with time, reminders of the door through which we all must pass. A sombre thought as the leaves fall and the gentle fires of autumn attend the dying of the year.

Strange that the best-known poem in english literature is not a lyric but an elegy written in a country churchyard. And, perhaps, the best-known psalm is the *De profundis*. Dying, we live and though we may speak little of death and abridge its obsequies, it remains just below the rim of consciousness like a recurring dream. In a parish one learns that the old do not fear death; it preoccupies the young. The young do not want eternal life, only eternal youth. The first grey hairs, no matter how soon they come, move them to fear their April has ended, their autumn begun. Death, for them, is not decease, but rather, the loss of vigour, of vitality. For many of the young, the old are the first reminders of mortality, and they are uneasy in their company. The old are not the living, just the undead.

Christ speaks often of death and this disturbed the apostles. And, for Christ, death is not the final breath but something always present, the bass clef in the music of humankind. His prime equation 'I am the Life' was not understood, and seemed to be denied when he was consigned to the tomb with few to weep for him. Yet it is at the tomb that Christ identifies with us to the point of totality. It is here he reveals his condition as brittle as that of anyone. For he died of weakness, wounded, bled white, carried inert and lifeless into a borrowed grave. He was degraded; identification could go no further. Our man. Not in heaven. But in hell.

For the Jews, to die was to descend into hell. Their hell, *Sheol*, was not Milton's magnificent waste-land, an arena for epic oratory, but a kind of conscious annihilation, the hall of the undead. No pain, no

pleasure, and no exit. Above all, no exit. It was death as damnation, enclosure without hope of reprieve. The Jews feared *Sheol* as they feared sin. For both converge on that most dismal condition — separation. It is not good to be alone. It is evil. It is hell. Separation from God, from people and from one's own still-centre is death and is experienced here. The prodigal, abandoned by friends, surviving on the swill he fed to pigs, was but the parody of a man, breathing but not living, dying while alive. Hell is the noun which impales his condition.

'He who was dead is alive again' is not mere metaphor but the first chord in the music of redemption. In towns and villages Christ met many whose lives were no more than endless drag, a journey without maps, with no inn of refreshment and no star to guide. It was to these Christ spoke, not pilgrims, but nomads adrift in a desert no one had trod, a dry and empty place, all drought and desolation. Hell is not an underworld, a private confinement, but, like the kingdom of heaven, builds within us. It is Christ who locates the devil not in the woods or the wild, but in the serpent that insinuates and seeks to possess the heart. And we are all prey to that possession. Jesus was tempted in the engaging language of flattery. Even on the cross.

Everyone of us seeks a centre to reality, something stable, what philosophers call the Absolute, and religion calls the Holy. Only God is holy and that is the address of the angels. 'Holy, Holy, Holy' is their song. Their work is to do God's bidding and we join their company when we come to God in adoration. Adoration is the docility of the undivided heart. It is then we experience the Really Real, and the heart expands in the heat of the true, the good and the beautiful. This awareness is both healing and wholeness. In the presence of the divine intensity we do nothing and say nothing. Except 'It is good to be here'. Here even the poet is dumb and the mystic can only stammer his experience.

In adoration we acquire a new consciousness which rhymes with the consciousness of Christ. The worst corruption is the corruption of consciousness and this is the shadow side in us all. For we are divided people and the genius of sin is to divide. 'There is another man inside of me and he is angry with me', writes John Donne. This is a universal lament and we may conclude that the rupture defies all surgery and knows no cure. Yet one cannot read the gospels with half an eye without being impressed by the resurrections awarded to the sick and the sinful. One line keeps recurring like a chorus. 'Your

sins are forgiven; your faith has made you whole'. For those with ears to hear this is the message and the melody. And the melody lingers on.

Holiness belongs to God. For us, it is healing, and the Word is the healing Word. We are all walking wounded and in danger of dying. We aspire to life but do not have the medication of recovery. Someone must provide the oil and wine, someone must stay to bandage our bleeding and find us an inn where there is care and company. We need a redeemer for we cannot be our physicians. Yet we resent a redeemer for he denies our autonomy, casts a slur on our competence. This resentment is the sour soil of sin.

Sin, at root, is refusal. Refusal to accept our creatureliness, refusal to acknowledge the Creator. This is the Adam-instinct in us all, the disease and the dying with which we live and partly live. Adam envied God for being God, and sought to replace him and to be author of his own destiny. But the creature does not have the capacity to know good and evil; that belongs to God. Only God can know evil and not be contaminated by it. He alone is immune to the virus which is the universal sickness and can be the sickness unto death. God alone is life without subtraction. He is single; we are composed and death is the dismal element in our composition. Simplicity is the last achievement of the saint and the single eye is the eye of God who sees this world as battered but beautiful and well worth redeeming.

The death and disease in us blur our vision, and we see the world through wounded eyes. Only God sees creation as good; we see it refracted through illusions and miss the many-splendoured thing. Healing entails disillusion and this pain is a pearl of great price. 'The one who hurts is the one who heals'. We waste the crosses we throw away. The whole world wants the resurrection and the life, but hesitates to climb the slopes for the gradient is steep, and we seek a path not paved with the stones of affliction. But mortality is always one hundred per cent and death allows no dispensations. Indeed, we live with death and Christ rehearsed death many times. In the temple he died to the world of childhood; in the wilderness to the life free of temptation; in Gethsemani, to the human instinct to survive. He was offered a choice between life and death. He chose death; he got life. Dying, he lived and those who would follow him walk the path he pioneered. He died alone so that we may not die alone.

Peter is a character from whom we can learn much. An outsize personality with that rare attribute of leadership. Strong, extrovert,

impetuous, he is the man built upon rock. His confession in Jesus as the Christ is boldly said and Jesus testifies it is no human utterance but a higher inspiration. Yet Peter has far to go; his baptism is yet to come. He has much to learn: about life, about death. They are as inseparable as convex and concave, as rise and fall. When Christ speaks of his own death Peter is bold enough to rebuke him for his seeming morbidity. Jesus answers with harsh reprimand: 'Get behind me, Satan'. There is sin and Satan in Peter, and like deep sin it suppurates unseen and resists diagnosis. He has still to learn who he is, what he is, and this true healing comes through hurt. He must die. Die to the illusion that he is strong, learn that his house is built upon the sand of self-deception.

It is a teenage servant girl who is the author of Peter's disillusion. A simple question and he answers with a lie. His fear of death is his master-emotion, stronger than his love of Christ, the Son of the living God. Peter sees death as hell, the night which knows no sunrise. This is the crux, the crisis which comes to all, the moment of temptation, the nativity of truth. When Christ dies, Peter dies. All the great healings are forgotten, so authoritarian is death, so absolute its argument. Peter weeps and his face is grained with tears of remorse. But remorse does not redeem. For remorse is not humility but hurt pride. It regresses on itself and turns away from the healer to nurse the hurt. There is no hurt like hurt pride and only some great sin reveals the pride hidden deep in us all. This can be the instrument of cure. As Augustine says, 'God makes use of our sins'. Yet only if we let go the illusion of our competence. Judas also betrayed Christ and sought to be his own forgiver. He took the money back, took his life. He would not ask for any absolution. So tenacious is pride; so powerful.

Sin confessed is both end and beginning, dying and rising, a baptismal moment. We move from remorse into sorrow. And sorrow, as Dante says, 're-marries us to God . . . ' It is new wine, a cordial for the dying to live and love again. Yet this wine is bitter on the palate of the proud; only the humble drink of this chalice, red as blood, and are restored to health and holiness. Humility is rare and asks for surrender and the pride of the heart resists capitulation. Sin is the test. Remorse is the response of the unholy. Sorrow returns and repents. It turns upward to God and inhales the clean resurrection air, was dead and is alive again, a new creature, a new creation.

We cannot survive without a consistent sorrow and a daily act of contrition. God loves a humble and contrite heart. For this is the

heart open to God, a window for the lively wind of the Spirit. It is the Spirit that imparts the wisdom to know ourselves and to accept our damaged condition. We cannot be our monitors nor know ourselves by introspection. God reveals me to me and our prayer must be Augustine's — *Noverim te, noverim me.* Prayer itself is an agent of disillusion for we do not only raise the heart but also the mind to God. The mind needs correction. Pride finds its sanctuary there; it is the mind that will not serve and aspires to mastery. It names knowledge as virtue and reason as sufficient, the goddess whose altar is made with human hands. We call pride the capital sin for it resides in the *caput*, the head, and the closed mind is the tomb of too much travail. No man can move the stone and no light can penetrate. This hell is not of God's making but is the manufacture of the mind, of the creature who disowns and despises his creatureliness. 'Better to reign in hell than serve in heaven'. Yet servants we are and God alone is almighty because all mercy. A man-made god is a monster and history is a chronicle of their crimes.

But there are so many death-things around us, so many within us that it is hard not to conclude that the human race is doomed to divide, that it is sin that holds the sceptre, death that holds dominion. 'Enjoy yourself now, you'll be a long time dead' is the theology of the office and factory floor. It is a persuasive creed and its cult is accumulation. More and more. Strangely it does not satisfy, and in every heart there is a murmur, an agitation which breaks surface when the waves rise and death comes near. Even the atheist may cry 'Lord, save me' when human agents of salvation prove impotent. In the storm, the apostles cried their distress and Christ stilled the waves. Then, with the wind stayed and the boat riding evenly, his words are stern and questioning: 'Why are you afraid, you of little faith?'

Faith is the inevitable word, its meaning not easy to impale. It is haloed in mystery and defies definition. It is earthed only in the man and woman of faith. There its electricity is grounded, and they are charged with a force that the faithless may envy or deride. 'Dying, we live' is the inscription etched on their hearts. They are rare people, rare as rubies and as precious. One observes how real faith always seemed to astonish Christ and to delight him. For the glory of God is a person fully alive, and it is faith that makes their vitality. Yet faith is first a dying. 'I believe' is a descent into the dark, an admission that we cannot live on our own reserves. This offends the arrogance in us all. We do not naturally want faith. We want knowledge. To see not to believe. To know, not to kneel. Thomas

speaks for the agnostic that hides within us: 'Unless I see, I will not believe'. But we cannot survive on what we can know; we cannot see the glory with common vision and unanointed eyes. 'Lord, that I may see' is the prayer not of the faithless but of the faithful. It is the faithful who are most aware of their imperfect vision.

Dying, we live, losing we gain, is the scandal of Christianity, nonsense to the Greek, offensive to the Jew. 'In my end is my beginning' was the motto of the ill-fated Mary, Queen of Scots. Robed in crimson, she went to the block uncomplainingly; she, too, had rehearsed death many times. So do we all, yet only the few accept that the daily sacrifice is the seed dying and rising to make corn and bread for our invigoration. It is natural to resent suffering, presumption to court it, sanctity to transform it. Suffering is just there. What counts is the reply. To accept or to refuse. Faith or resentment: this is the option. A pastoral priest finds too many whose presiding emotion is resentment at some past hurt, a wound which is forever red, open and unhealed. Yet there is healing always available, and no sin or sorrow lies beyond the reach of God, for he is infinite in his forgiveness. But forgiveness takes two: one who asks, one who heals. Forgiveness is the yeast in Christianity, the life — and the resurrection. One might almost define a Christian as one who believes, with reserve, in forgiveness. Nothing is more difficult.

Forgiveness is difficult, for it is not common sense. It transcends logic; it breaks the law of cause and effect. Common sense stands on the *lex talionis*, an eye for an eye, and reprisal is the theology of the unblest and unbaptized. It is hard to forgive one's enemies; harder to forgive one's friends. It is easy to preach the Sermon on the Mount, impossible to bring it to earth. With God, with God alone, all things are possible, even forgiveness. Yet forgiveness is, first, dying, the hardest dying of all. A dying to self-regard and to the pride which claims exemption from human meanness and malice. Christ's whole life from the crib to the cross and beyond is a drama in many acts, sorrowful and glorious, with forgiveness as the theme and refrain. True faith converges on forgiveness. There is the fire which refines the gold. The forgiving person can never be unhappy. The resentful person is the author of his own hell and unhappiness. Refusing to die, he refuses to live.

Forgiveness is the dying-we-rise. It is the truth which undergirds the truths. But the great truth cannot be spoken. It can only be acted. In John's phrase 'we do the truth'. Forgiveness, then, is an event. And the event is a person. The person of Christ is distilled

forgiveness, and his whole life, not his passion alone, a life of giving and forgiving. Faith is his call; forgiveness his reply. For unfaith disables God. He could work no miracles where there was no faith. The rising calls for a previous dying, and faith is a dying to the illusion of salvation by self alone. In Christ we see the fullness of faith and learn the secret hidden from the beginning, that God is not a god of retribution but of forgiveness. We learn too that we cannot survive except under a canopy of forgiveness. To deny the need for forgiveness is to seek asylum in the wilderness where the devil has his domain, and many are seduced to enter this infertile place. Even hell has its attraction and Christ was not exempt from the temptation to abandon the Father and worship at an easier altar.

The liturgy is the truth acted, the event played, the person represented. At the Easter vigil we enter a church peeled of everything that makes for prayer and for presence. No light, no music, nothing to comfort, a scenario of hell and vacuity, until a spark is struck, and the Spirit which first gave order to the primeval chaos brings light and life to a God-forsaken world. The paschal candle, symbol of the dead and wounded Christ, receives the light and we sing the first chord of Resurrection. *Lumen Christi.* Here forgiveness is made real and hell is harrowed and Christ is risen from death and hell and from the hopelessness that infects every heart. This is the event which is the hinge of history and the great surprise. For Jesus does not come back from death. He goes through. Death, too, is dead and, in Paul's most consoling line, 'for those in Christ Jesus there is no more condemnation'. To hell and futility. We who were dead are alive again.

No people can live without a vision of greatness. Every nation has those it remembers in song and pageantry, and confers on them the name of immortality for, though dead, they live on. Children are told of the achievements and venerate their memory. The pagans would deify their leaders and call them gods. This is not the naïveté of woodland people but an instinct strong in every society, simple or sophisticated. The whole, wide world longs for someone, human as ourselves, yet able to break the constraints nature imposes and soar to heights almost divine in their altitude. They meet evil; they face adversity. But these are not forces of defeat but become the instruments of their glory and elevation. They defy death for people make them immortal in stone and story. Their deeds stay to inspire us and the grave becomes their pedestal. Death abdicates its authority and their end is a beginning.

The world calls them heroes and the Church names them saints and honours them in its calendar. And the world needs these luminaries as the night sky needs the stars for a glimpse of glory on this obscure planet. Without this vision of greatness the people die without hope of rising or promise of redeeming. There is a universal longing for the Christ, for the man who is unconstrained and who, in his person, reveals the quality of man in whom there is no guile. This man must die; all flesh is grass. Yet the tomb is not the end of the story but of a chapter. The finale is to come when the tomb is transformed and becomes a womb, pregnant with a new and larger life. A life where there are no more tears, no pain, no partings: what people call happiness.

The most tenacious desire is happiness and all seek it from dawn to dusk, year in, year out. We know happiness here but fleetingly; a warm wind that blows too briefly. We need more, a bliss we call beatitude which does not die with the leaves, that happiness we name heaven. It is not only after-life. Indeed, there can be no after-life if there is no before-life. The images which tessellate the gospels are of the soil, of seed and maturation. Faith itself will die; it is a green and growing thing. It flowers in love and happy-ever-after is its ending.